

# Factors Responsible for Poor English Reading Comprehension at Secondary Level

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**Abstract:** The present study shows factors responsible for poor English reading comprehension at secondary school level students. The purpose of this study is to explore those factors and to suggest remedies how to strengthen English reading comprehension of the students. English is the 2<sup>nd</sup> language of Pakistani students and Kachru (1996) places it in the outer circle. Test and interviews are conducted to get the data. Different factors like poor command of vocabulary, habit of cramming, no interest to learn creativity in reading but the sole goal is just to pass the examination which are found responsible for poor English reading comprehension. Motivation to learn reading can develop reading comprehension skill of students.

**Keywords:** English Reading, Comprehension, Language Teaching Methodology

## 1. Introduction

This study concerns with exploring factors responsible for poor English reading comprehension at secondary level and it goes on to suggest remedies and improvements in teaching methods and techniques.

'The reading is thinking' is a popular notion in the area of literacy instruction (Cunningham & Allington, 2006; Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). Reading skill is an important skill. It is a stepping stone in the walk of knowledge. The importance of English reading comprehension by the language policy in Pakistan as English is the language of education and research. Without developing English reading comprehension, higher education and research are very difficult. Reading is an activity which involves comprehensions and interpretations of ideas symbolized by written or printed page. It is clear, without this ability readers would find themselves confronted with strange and weird symbols which would make no sense for them. Very low level ability of reading allows a reader to differentiate the letters of a particular language from non-linguistic marks. In this paper an effort will be made to find out difficulties and problems which are blocking the way of English reading comprehension so that a feasible solution will be devised to improve this important skill. With the rapid

changes in the field of education, the traditional methods of teaching reading have become obsolete. New techniques of teaching reading skill and especially teaching English reading skills and reading comprehension have been introduced. This paper aims at concentrating techniques that should be employed in classrooms to improve reading comprehension and reading skills.

This paper will prove useful both for teachers and students at secondary level. This research will also help researchers in future to move forward with a better vision to improve reading comprehension. The role of reading skill in improving other linguistic skills and the role of reading skill in our educational systems will also be brought in consideration.

### 1.1. Objectives of the Study

- To find out difficulties and problems in reading comprehension.
- To develop understanding of various methods being used for reading comprehension.
- To improve reading skills of students.
- To provide suggestions for improvement.

### 1.2. Research Questions

- What are the key factors which affect English reading

comprehension?

- To what extent, the reading skills improve other linguistic skills?

### 1.3. Hypothesis

“If the factors affecting English reading comprehension are discovered, the suggested remedies in teaching methodology can improve the reading comprehension of the students.”

### 1.4. Significance of the Study

This study carries immense significance from a number of aspects. It will yield useful data relating to reading skills. Suggestions and recommendations from this study are expected very useful for the improvement of reading comprehension and teaching reading methodologies. The research will go a long way to improve English reading skills in secondary schools. This study will help syllabus setters to add suitable reading materials in the books, which may prove helpful in improving reading comprehension. This research paper will also help the higher authority of Examinations Boards to make arrangements to evaluate reading skills in exams, so that students pay more heed to reading skills. This study will also enable the authorities concerned to analyze the difficulties, problems and factors blocking the way of reading comprehension.

### 1.5. Limitations of the Study

In view of the time and resources available to the researchers, this research is limited to:

- Govt. High School for boys, Dinga
- Millet High School, Channan
- Unique Science Academy, Noor Jamal
- Dar-e-Arqam High School for Girls, Dinga

This research is only limited to Dinga city and its surroundings. Some schools are selected from Dinga city and some are selected from the nearby villages.

## 2. Literature Review

Reading is a guessing game in which the readers reconstruct the message which is encoded by writers (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983). Reading skill is one of the important skills for acquiring knowledge. The world progressed after the invention of writing script which made the material available for the people to read. Writing skill provides record of the previous knowledge and researches, and reading skill helps to utilize the previous written material for further progress. Reading is a stepping stone in the walk of knowledge. Its importance is also clear from the very first Quranic Revelation, “IQRA” which means, “READ”. Furthermore, a lot of emphasis is given to reading and learning at many other places in Islam.

One of the major purposes of reading is on its comprehension. The purposes differentiate among different types of readings. These different types of readings can be labeled as: scanning, skimming, reading to learn, reading for

general idea/understanding, reading for critical evaluation and reading to integrate information (Carrell & Grabe, 2010). Scanning is such a reading process which needs recognition of some visual form such as: number, word or phrase (Carver, 1992). Reading for understanding, is a reading process that requires visual and semantic process and the mental construction of the text summary (ibid). Reading to learn does not only require summary of a text but also different chunks of information which are elaborated in different sets of information (ibid). Reading comprehension occurs when reader extracts and combines different types of information from the read text and makes a link between the new information and the already known ones (Koda, 2007).

English in Pakistan is placed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> circle: the outer circle in the model given by Kachru (1996) in which English is learnt and used as a 2<sup>nd</sup> language. In Pakistan, English is the language of higher education, military and government. Power is associated with English language and it is the language of elite class (Coleman, 2012). Reading of a text in second language (English language) is more complex than reading in 1<sup>st</sup> language. There are a lot of variations in L2 reading such as variations in age, training, schooling motivation, socio-economic level, and at individual level (Carrell & Grabe, 2010). The readers, reading in L2, have to acquire a complex cognitive ability which is different from reading in L1 (ibid).

Reading comprehension is complex process, in which many other skills are used (Cain et al, 2004). Many factors are involved which affect this reading comprehension process (Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Samuels, 1983) and these factors are related to the text, context, work and the reader (Snow, 2002). Vocabulary is also one of the main factors which affect reading comprehension (Nagy, 1998 as cited in Bauman, 2009).

Vocabulary, among many others, is a vital factor which affects reading comprehension. Different researchers suggest different amount of vocabulary for reading comprehension in L2. Laufer (1989) investigated to find out how much amount of vocabulary is necessary for reading comprehension. She concludes that 95 per cent tokens of the text should be familiar to the reader to comprehend the whole text. Nation (2001) suggests that the necessary percentage for comprehension should be approximately 98 per cent. These researches show that vocabulary is an essential factor for reading comprehension of the text. If students’ vocabulary is weak, they will not be able to understand or comprehend the whole meaning of any texts. Students who have problems in reading comprehension have poor or limited vocabulary (Biemiller & Boote, 2006; Rupley & Nichols, 2005).

Reading speed/rate also matters in comprehension of texts. Carver (1992) studies that in L1 reading, fluent readers can read between 200 to 300 words per minute. Fluency in reading develops as students progress through different grades and age level.

Word recognition and comprehension help in reading speed in L2. Background knowledge also plays a significant role in comprehending texts. Floyd and Carrell (1987) show that

students, who have lack of cultural knowledge about the target language, can enhance their reading comprehension ability by being taught explicitly the cultural knowledge of target knowledge. Students can perform better if prior knowledge and topic interest is high than students whose topic interest and background knowledge are low (Carrell & Wise, 1998). The background knowledge and topic interest show a significant role to understand the information given in texts.

Meta-cognition also influences the reading abilities of learners (Brown et al, 1986). One's own knowledge and controlling of one's own actions during reading are two diverse aspects of meta-cognition. Successful and fluent learners show better level of controlling their actions during reading and meta-cognition knowledge than novice and less successful learners or readers (Baker & Beall, 2009). Successful readers use different type of strategies for successful comprehension (Pressley, 2006). The readers who use more strategies score high in reading comprehension tasks (Anderson, 1991). For better performance, knowing of different strategies does not mean performing well; a reader who knows how to use different strategies can perform better (ibid).

The present study is an endeavor to explore the factors which affect the reading comprehension of Pakistani students. Because English, in Pakistan, is given prestige at all levels and it has become the symbol of status, power and the language of education. English, in Pakistan, is taught as a compulsory subject from primary to graduate levels. It is used for higher studies in Pakistan. It is ultimately second or 3<sup>rd</sup> language of Pakistani students. It has become the need of students to get higher education to walk step by step by the world. Reading skill is an important skill because students have to read different types of books, journals, newspapers, web blogs and exploring information from the internet. Without comprehension reading is useless. The different factors which are involved for better reading comprehension such as vocabulary, reading speed, word recognition, meta-cognition and reading strategies are discussed above, and the studies and findings of different researchers regarding to these factors are also discussed. This study is different from the previous researches in the selection of place. No study has been done in Dinga region and its surroundings to explore the problems and factors affecting the reading comprehension of the students of this region. This will be sole study of this type which will make the learners aware of factors which affect their reading comprehension and they, by knowing these factors, will improve their reading comprehension consciously. The teachers will also be benefited by knowing these factors. It will help them to improve their teaching 'reading' methodology and techniques by bringing innovation to their teaching methodology. The present study will provide novice researchers a base for researching in this area.

### 3. Research Methodology

This research is descriptive in nature. The qualitative and quantitative research will be carried out for this study. The

survey method for this research will consist on the following steps.

#### 3.1. Research Instruments

##### a. Worksheet

Worksheet will be used to check the mistakes and weak areas of students' reading comprehension. The nature of mistakes will be examined through this test.

##### b. Interviews

Interviews of the students and the teachers will be arranged. Interviews from students explore the problems faced by students during reading comprehension and suggestions will be asked from them to overcome these problems. The interviews from teachers will help to know their observations of the nature of mistakes and factors which are responsible for students' poor reading comprehension in English language. Their suggestions will be helpful to give suggestions and remedies of these factors and problems.

#### 3.2. Population

15 students of 10<sup>th</sup> class will be selected from each school for test and 5 students for interview; and 5 teachers will be interviewed from each school whose qualification is M.A English (Literature or Linguistics).

#### 3.3. Sample

60 students will be taken from 10<sup>th</sup> class randomly from each school for fetching the data for this research. 20 students will be interviewed for this study. 20 teachers will be selected in total for the purpose of research and questioning. Systematic, random, technique will be used for all types of selection.

#### 3.4. Test

A passage is given to students in which students are asked to read the passage loudly so that their reading speed and word recognition can be checked. Students are asked to supply the meanings, in both languages: English and Urdu, of some chosen difficult words so that their vocabulary level can be checked in both languages. Some questions are asked from the students to supply answers so that the syntax structure of students' writing can be checked. The sentence structure of students in writing will help to check the comprehension level of students' reading (How much students' reading comprehension is affected by the sentence structure; either the students with poor syntax structure understand the text in the same way as the students understand with strong syntax structure in writing). The answer of the questions will also help to make an idea of the comprehension of the students, either the answers of the asked questions are relevant to questions. It will also help to guess the critical writing of the students. Critical writing helps to make the judgment of reading comprehension, if the students write critically; their reading comprehension will be excellent. Reading aloud and writing will help to integrate reading skill with other skills.

## 4. Results & Findings

### 4.1. Test

The test is taken from 60 students of 4 different schools. The first fact that is revealed from this test is that students are not able to supply the meanings (in English language) of the difficult words asked from them. Even not a single student can give the meaning of the words in English language. The reason behind this fact comes to know on investigating that students are not taught word-meanings from English to English. So, they don't have practice of memorizing or learning word-meanings from English to English. In writing meanings of the difficult English words in Urdu, the results vary from student to student. A small percentage of students are able to provide the meanings of more than 70 per cent words, some students are able to give the meanings of more than 50 per cent words, and many students cannot provide the meanings of more than 40 per cent words. The results in providing meaning in Urdu are different than providing meanings in English because students are taught to memorize the meanings of English words in Urdu. The way of teaching is very affective in learning vocabulary and the meanings in both languages.

When students are asked to read the passage loudly so that their reading speed and word-recognition can be checked, the varying results are found. Only a small number of students are able to read the passage fluently and to pronounce accurately and fluently. A large number of students are not able to read fluently; many are not able to pronounce or read some words. These words seem alien to them as they have to recognize the words written in an alien script.

In answering the questions which are asked at the end of the passage, many students cannot write even a single well-structured sentence. The subject verb agreement seems very weak. They do not know even where to write the verb, helping verb or adjective or adverb. The use of preposition is very weak. Some students don't use the preposition where it is necessary and many students use the preposition wrongly. Some students just pick out some part of the passage and place it in front of the question. Their question comprehension also seems weak because they are providing another answer which is not the answer of the very question but of some other question. Only a small number of students are able to answer the questions in broken language.

### 4.2. Interviews

After the completion of the test, students are interviewed. Students are asked about problems and factors which create difficulty in comprehension of the passage. Different opinions come to know. Some students are of the opinions that their English vocabulary is very weak. They are not taught the meanings of the English words in English but only in Urdu; despite of this the words used in the passage are difficult and some are totally new to them so that they cannot comprehend all of the passage. Some students blame the syllabus that syllabus is not well designed to provide them pretty amount of

vocabulary that is useful in daily conversation. The vocabulary used in text books is different than the vocabulary used in newspapers, articles, novels, radio and TVs etc. Some students put the opinion that teaching methodology is not good enough to make them learn the sufficient amount of vocabulary.

One of the students opines that we are not taught speaking skills at schools so, we cannot use the words learnt from the books or teachers in our daily conversation; and it results vanish of learned words from our mind. Some students are of the opinion that we are not habitual to read newspapers and sports news that is why our vocabulary is weak; we cannot learn new words. A few of them say that their grammar is weak; their tenses are weak; they do not know the rules of making sentences; lack of control on grammar keeps them away from understanding English books, passages, stories and essays etc. A couple of students say that they are not interested in English; English should not be taught to us; the only purpose of including English in syllabus is to fail the students in the examination. In giving suggestions to improve their reading skills, some students say that they should be taught the tenses; tenses will help them to understand the written text and its meanings. The vocabulary should be taught by using the words into sentences.

After the test and interview from the students, teachers are also requested to give their observations about the core reasons and factors which cause the poor English reading comprehension of the students. All the teachers welcome us warmly except a few of them; they consider us some monitoring team from the government. After the satisfaction, they agree for interview. Giving their opinion about the poor reading comprehension in English language, some teachers opine that our students are used to rote learning; they become habitual to cram the words and sentences to pass the exam. Teachers also do not encourage them for creativity. Teachers are strict to students to read and write accurately as they are taught by the teachers. Students, instead of learning new things and bringing innovations to their previous knowledge, just cram the words, sentences, stories, essays and other things without understanding and comprehending them. Students should be encouraged to understand the text first and then they should be encouraged to write by themselves instead of crammed text. In this way, the words and sentence structures used by them in their own writing will help them to learn the vocabulary, tenses, structure of different types of clauses and tenses; teachers should highlight their mistakes and encourage the students to improve themselves. This will bring innovations and improvements in their learning.

The learned vocabulary, by using in their own writing, will be stored in students' memory for a long time and it will help them in future to comprehend any texts. Some teachers suggest that students don't know techniques of guessing meaning from the context. The students go for word for word meaning; they do not try to guess the meaning of the words from the context in which they are used. One teacher opines that students do not have control over comprehension of parts of speech. A single word can be used as a noun, verb and

adjective or as any other part of speech; students misunderstand them and make incorrect comprehension of the text. One teacher suggests that such a passage is difficult to understand for the students in which they are not interested or they do not have background knowledge about that topic. Topic should be relevant to the students' background knowledge. Students should do more practice of reading so that they can develop automaticity with words. Some teachers say that students are weak at understanding questions in a particular tense, and they write the answer in different tense from the tense of the question asked; they should develop the understanding of tenses. A couple of teachers talk about the idioms, proverbs, similes, metaphors and other figures of speech to understand the actual meaning of the text. Mostly teachers opine that reading speed doesn't matter in reading comprehension; it has no effect on comprehension of the text.

## 5. Discussion

The data taken by the test and interviews of the students and teachers reveals many facts before us to point out central factors which are responsible for poor English reading comprehension. The first factor, which blocks the reading comprehension of the students in English language, is a lack of mastery over vocabulary. Vocabulary of the students is very weak and for the successful comprehension of the text, Nation (2001) opines that student should know the 98 percent of the vocabulary of the text. Without mastering of handsome amount of vocabulary, comprehension is not only difficult but almost impossible. Good reading speed does not affect much on comprehension of the text. A student can comprehend any texts well with normal reading speed if s/he does not have problems related to vocabulary, context and background knowledge etc.

The second thing which has importance in reading comprehension is guessing the meaning from the context; students are not trained to infer the meanings from the context. Students go after finding the actual meaning of the word; they do not try to assume the meaning from the context. Training in guessing the meaning from context can develop the comprehension of reading in English.

Sometimes student are seemed facing problems in reading some words. Their word recognition is seemed to be weak which brings the fact before us that students are not habitual in reading English texts. They have no interest in reading English literature, newspapers and English stories, novel and essays etc. They read their English books just for the sake of passing exams. Developing interest in reading other material written in English language can build their reading comprehension.

Rot-learning is just destroying the critical thinking of the students. Both teachers and students are responsible for this bad habit. Students become habitual of cramming the text just to pass the exam and to get good grades; teachers also encourage rot-learning. Instead of discouraging this bad habit, teachers are happy that their students can cram well and accurately. Fulfilling the responsibility of teaching, teachers can encourage the innovative learning. Students should be

given an opportunity of free writing, so that their vocabulary, sentence structure, critical thinking and innovation can be developed which will help them in better reading comprehension of English text.

Students' sentence structure and command over different parts of speech are also weak. Students are weak at the recognition of words used at different places as different parts of speech. The same word being used as a noun, a verb, an adjective or an adverb gives different meanings and senses. Good understanding of parts of speech develops students' reading comprehension.

Students are not aware of different reading strategies. Pressley (2006) says that successful learners use different types of strategies for successful reading comprehension. Teachers can train students in mastering the different reading strategies like skimming, scanning, previewing, predicting, anticipation and reading in chunks etc. to make them successful readers.

## 6. Conclusion

From the whole discussion it has become obvious that there are many key factors which affect reading comprehension. These key factors include: poor mastery over vocabulary, habit of cramming instead of learning and understanding; mission is to pass the examination not to develop skill, weak sentence structure and tenses, not using the tricks to infer the meaning from context, no habit of reading the newspapers, articles, novels and other books, and a lack of interest from both sides: from teachers and students in developing the skill. Students are not taught different types of reading skills like loud reading, intensive reading, extensive reading and silent reading for the better comprehension of the text. Reading strategies like skimming, scanning, previewing, predicting, anticipation and reading in chunks are unknown to students. Reading skills also improve other linguistic skills. If reading skill is good, students can write and utter well-structured and meaningful sentences. It provides them handsome amount of vocabulary, written model, and the knowledge of different cultures and societies to make them write and speak in a sophisticated way.

## Recommendations

The following recommendation will prove useful for the improvement of reading comprehension.

- None of the methods itself is complete in itself. Teachers should apply a combination of methods according to the ability of the pupils.
- Word-meaning should be taught in English to English; it will develop their vocabulary.
- Cramming and rot-learning should be discouraged at all to make the students creative. Teachers should encourage the students to understand the texts instead of cramming.
- Teachers should illustrate how to infer meaning from the context.
- Tenses, sentence structure and parts of speech should be

taught to the students in a well manner.

- Reading skill should be taught with integration to other skills.
- Teachers should read all the words and sentences with correct stress and intonation. Illustration should be simple but not childish.
- Teachers should try to develop correct reading habit among the students.
- All the reading skills should be taught to the students.
- Students should be made aware of different reading strategies.

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